

In Silencing its People, China Invites Disaster

An interview with Badiucao, Ewa Dryjańska

July 10, 2020

From repression on the mainland to tightening its grip on Hong Kong, the actions of the Chinese government in 2020 have only confirmed its authoritarian nature and lack of respect for human rights and dignity. Despite its disastrous initial cover-up, China's health response has seemingly since been effective. But, from unemployment to inequality, the ripple effects of Covid-19 will be massive in China as everywhere.

In the Xinjiang region, over one million members of the Uighur minority continue to be held in detention camps. In Hong Kong, the new security law has effectively ended the city's political autonomy and democracy. Since the law was passed in late June, many political activists have gone underground and crimes such as "subversion" risk life sentences. Badiucao is a world-renowned dissident cartoonist based in Australia. His art speaks to the struggle between humanity and repressive, hypocritical power. Ewa Dryjańska interviewed him about his journey, the current situation in Hong Kong and China, and the future of democracy around the world.

Ewa Dryjańska: How did you become a cartoonist?

Badiucao: By accident. I started making cartoons in 2008, around the time of the Zibo train crash in China, in which many people died and were injured. The incident provoked a public outcry in the country. People were commenting on Weibo, a social media platform similar to Twitter. I wanted to be a part of the discussion. I am not so good with words but I've always had a passion for drawing and art. That's how it started.

You studied law. Does that mean that you were also interested in the relationship between the state and the individual, but in the end you chose the path of art?

I studied law at the East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai. It was not my first choice, but rather my family's expectation. They wanted me to work as a lawyer or in another highly paid profession. But my family history gave me quite a different idea as to who I could be. My grandparents were filmmakers in China. They were persecuted by the government in the Hundred Flowers Campaign, which targeted artists and intellectuals, and they died as a result. That's why my family has never wanted me to be an artist. They discouraged me from doing anything creative, believing it could bring bad fortune to the family. But sometimes, you know your destiny. I believe that mine is to create art for issues I truly care about.

Do you think that your studies and the tragic history of your family influenced your creativity as a political cartoonist?

Absolutely. Being an artist is one thing but being an artist who cares for human rights is another. The books that I read, the stories and ideas that I learned helped me to shape my understanding of the rule of law, democracy, and the difference between the systems of China and so-called Western civilisation. Universities in China are tightly controlled by the government. It is not easy to perceive things differently through the education system in this country. But I was lucky enough to have some brave and independent teachers that taught me truthfully about politics and human rights. That helped shape me into who I am as a political cartoonist today.

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How successful is the education system in China at encouraging support for the state as well as patriotic attitudes and behaviour among citizens?

This system is designed to control people, no doubt about it. But they cannot control every individual. There will always be something beyond control, especially when it comes to what people say. Thanks to that, I had the opportunity to meet good teachers at university. There are not many, but it takes just one or two to open your mind to the world. My family history shielded me from all this education propaganda, enabling me to tell the difference between truth and lies. I will always be vigilant when it comes to China's narrative of itself and its education system. I will always check things myself before accepting anything.

Did your objections make you stand out in China, or were they shared by your colleagues?

I didn't express my political stance while living in China because the whole situation was quite oppressed. Everyone concentrated on getting a job and starting a family. I only started to show my character and speak out against the Chinese government after I had left the country. Only after arriving in Australia and escaping censorship did I feel at liberty. My studies in China prepared me for that stage.

Some scholars working on the political history of China argue that Chinese – and generally East Asian – values are different to the Western values of individualism and democracy. They recall, for example, the genesis of the first emperor and the political philosophy which supported him: legalism (*fajia*), an ancient version of totalitarianism. What is your opinion?

The idea that cultural differences mean that Chinese and East Asian people don't understand the value of democracy or freedom is total nonsense. Just look at Taiwan, Japan or Korea. These countries are good examples of how East Asian – or more precisely the Confucian circle – countries can adopt Western values. In reality, these values are not so Western and they are not so old. When we think about the genesis of democracy, we think of the ancient Greeks. But that system was very different from modern democracy. It was not built on universal human rights but the interests of the privileged caste, on a system of oppression. Democracy and human rights as we know them today are a very modern product of the civilisation born after the Enlightenment, about 300 years ago. Let's not forget that Europe was under the sway of the Church for centuries.

These values are comprehensible for anyone, regardless of race or culture. If we examine Chinese culture carefully, there are certain ideas which are very close to democracy and freedom even in Confucian theory itself. For example, one of the sayings of the philosopher Mencius was that the people were more important than the ruler. He also emphasised feedback from the people. Of course, the idea of democracy was not prominent in Chinese history, but there are nevertheless points where elements of democracy existed, especially at the beginning of the civilisation. Instead of saying that the Chinese are different because they didn't develop democracy, we should think about the positive side of the country's history.

This desire for democracy is visible in Hong Kong...

For Hong Kong, it is even stronger. When Hong Kong was a British colony, it was not given full democracy. What the protestors want now is not partial democracy, but full democracy as in the rest of the Free World. Ultimately, we are all the same and can tell the difference between good and bad.

It seems that the Chinese central government is tightening its grip not only on Hong Kong and ethnic minorities like Uighurs and Tibetans but also common citizens through surveillance and the social credit system. Do you think that it can still be stopped?

Modern technologies assist authoritarian regimes in oppression and make social control much easier. But freedom and democracy are needed for a prosperous economy too. The so-called Chinese economic miracle has come to an end because it is not enough for reforms to be only economic. The Chinese government will have to do more to make the system freer and avoid corruption, contrary to what they are doing now. The more they control society, the less creativity there is. Unless they somehow manage to stimulate the economy, the slowdown will pose the fundamental challenge for the authorities: the loss of their legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

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That's the dilemma faced by the Chinese government and that's why it is not sustainable. Although they deny this and claim that China is an alternative model for civilization, so many events, including Covid-19, are a result of Chinese censorship. The authorities had multiple chances to stop the pandemic. Luckily, even in this tightly controlled society, heroes like Doctor Li Wenliang dared to speak out about the dangers of the virus.

The Chinese system was unable to prevent the coronavirus crisis and now the whole world is paying the price. The Chinese government is currently trying to portray itself as a kind of saviour – the country that managed the virus most successfully. But the price that the Chinese people paid was never revealed to the public. We will never know how many people died in Wuhan and other cities. A government that doesn't allow people to speak out about dangers will eventually be swallowed by disaster.

China's influence extends well beyond its own borders and even global powers try to avoid angering Beijing. When Australia suggested an independent international investigation into the coronavirus outbreak, France replied that instead of looking for who is guilty we should focus on combating the virus. Are you afraid of growing Chinese influence worldwide?

Giving way in the name of short-term gains such as the favour of the Chinese government or cheap products is a dangerous move. The Chinese system behaves like a virus: not satisfied with staying in the country, it wants to introduce the model elsewhere. The question is why are some so easily led by Chinese money, and at what price. By getting too close to China and relying too heavily on its market, they put their own countries at risk.

But it's not only the financial aspect. The Australian government was right to insist on an investigation into the outbreak from early on because it could help prevent such a tragedy from happening again. Of course, it is important to deal with the virus right now, but I see no reason not to investigate the origins of the virus meanwhile. China is now sending threats: "We're the world's biggest supplier of medical equipment. If you investigate the origins of the outbreak or the role of the Chinese government, we'll stop deliveries." What kind of behaviour is that? China is bullying the rest of the world. How do we deal with terrorism and bullying? We do not compromise. We should fight back. That is why Australia should insist on the inquiry.

Whistleblowers are warning that governments, even democratic ones, may use this pandemic as an excuse to increase the surveillance of their citizens. Do you sometimes wonder whether democratic countries will be tempted to follow China's path?

Every government is susceptible to corruption. But Western countries have democracy, rule of law, and means to

restrain power that are absent in China. The Chinese government is trying to normalise the exchange of citizens' freedom in the name of protection and safety. In one Chinese city, a programme was recently introduced which obliges citizens to declare their health status to the government online, and the authorities want to make this permanent. It is a major violation of privacy and the danger is that even the Free World will try to justify taking privacy away from citizens.

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Privacy is also related to the manipulation of public opinion, which is the ultimate threat to democracy. When public opinion is manipulated, there can be no fair elections or referendums. I believe that this was the case in 2016 with the UK's Brexit referendum and possibly the US presidential elections, due to Russian influence. But democratic societies do have free media, and there are even great whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning or Julian Assange that keep power in check. These don't exist in China. There's no *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. There's no Edward Snowden – just one doctor who ends up at the police station the day after speaking out. This lack of freedom is precisely why democratic governments should not adopt the Chinese way.

Could the current situation influence how China is perceived worldwide? What about in China itself?

For those worldwide who were sympathising with China, this is a good opportunity to reflect on whether this beautiful story is true or not. China presents itself as a saviour but the pressure is already being turned up regarding the crisis. It must be said that the American administration is playing a dirty game by blaming China entirely for its own mismanagement of the virus. The public should question the actions of their governments as well as how China let this virus become a global threat.

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As for the Chinese people, it is hard to say due to censorship and lack of free expression. You can never tell what people think because it's just too risky to speak up. After Doctor Li died, Chinese internet platforms were flooded with mourning and anger. I think that this outpouring was just the tip of the iceberg. However, there was a harsh crackdown and this was silenced very forcefully. But who knows what will be the final straw? Maybe the Hong Kong protesters, maybe the concentration camps in Xinjiang, maybe the Tibetan movement or even Taiwan. People in China are not just dull slaves, they have their own thoughts. If they were given the time and space to act, change in China would be inevitable.

Why did you decide to reveal your face? For a long time, not only your real name but also your appearance was hidden. The Chinese secret service is very active abroad, including in Australia where you live and where several scandals involving Chinese nationals have occurred.

It was not a choice that I made but rather a situation I was put into. My identity became compromised before I revealed my face. My family in China was threatened by the authorities and they demanded I stop making art. That

was three days before my first solo exhibition in Hong Kong at the end of 2018. After that, I decided to reveal my face in a documentary about my art called *China's Artful Dissident*, which was released in 2019 on the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre. It was not an easy choice. I don't know exactly when or how my identity was compromised. The Chinese spying network is very active globally, especially in Australia where we have a huge Chinese population. I receive digital threats daily and I have been followed by suspicious people, probably members of the Chinese spying network. My internet has also been attacked. This is the reality that most of dissidents face, and to think that I am just an artist, not a hardline revolutionary.



Badiucao is a renowned Chinese political cartoonist. He lives in Australia where he uses art to challenge censorship and dictatorship in China via his Twitter account @badiucao. His work has been used by Amnesty International, Freedom House, BBC, CNN and China Digital Times and exhibited in Australia, America and Italy.



Ewa Dryjańska is a freelance journalist from Poland. She studied international relations at the University of Warsaw and achieved a PhD from the same university examining the relations between China and Japan. She previously worked with green NGOs and has organised numerous educational and cultural events connected with the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima.

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